

May 2009 Casework Success Story: Phyllis Shaughnessy

After months of battling with the VA, Phyllis Shaughnessy turned to our office to assist in obtaining her late husband's military pension check for the month he passed away. Many surviving spouses are unaware that they are entitled to receive a pension or compensation payment for the month that their spouse died. Five years after the death of George L. Shaughnessy, a paratrooper during World War II, Phyllis is excited to use the payment at the beauty salon.

Read below for Florida Today's report of her story. [Click here](#) for more casework success stories.

In widow's pension hunt, tenacity pays

BY JOHN A. TORRES

FLORIDA TODAY

COCOA -- More than five years after her husband died, Phyllis Shaughnessy received a check for \$104, representing the military pension payment for the month he died. But she didn't get it without a fight.

Shaughnessy, 82, of Cocoa spent five months arguing with Department of Veterans Affairs officials over the telephone and finally had to enlist the help of U.S. Rep. Suzanne Kosmas.

"If I hadn't contacted the congresswoman's office, I wouldn't have received the check," Shaughnessy said. "I can't believe how hard I had to fight for \$104. But they didn't know who they were up against. The more they stonewalled, the harder I fought."

Kosmas met this week with Shaughnessy, whose husband, George L. Shaughnessy, a paratrooper during World War II, died Oct. 20, 2003.

"We're happy she brought this to our attention," Kosmas said. "There are a lot of women who don't know about this. We have a great debt to veterans who made these sacrifices for our freedoms."

According to VA estimates, there are thousands of surviving spouses every year who do not realize they are eligible to receive a pension payment for the month their spouse died, known as an MOD, for "month of death." It is an issue officials say is being rectified.

"This benefit payment is long overdue to many of our beneficiaries," Secretary of Veterans Affairs James Peake said in a statement. "In these difficult economic times, it is imperative that we take aggressive action to fix this situation for the families of veterans."

The problem can be traced to 1997, when a change in law affected how pension balances were paid out to surviving spouses. When the problem was brought to Peake's attention, he formed a task force to start identifying and paying the beneficiaries who never received the benefit.

According to Kosmas' office, in the first few weeks of the task force, it identified 11,000 eligible spouses and 73,000 who already had received the benefit correctly.

"Obviously, this was something that needed to be rectified," Kosmas said.

Shaughnessy applied for the lump-sum month-of-death payment in January, after reading about it in the newspaper. But she had trouble receiving the payment.

The first snag, she said, was that her husband's service number was not his Social Security number. The second issue was that she had to prove they were married at the time of his death. Then, there seemed to be a mix-up when Shaughnessy said VA officials started questioning her application for her husband's disability benefits.

"How can I possibly apply for his disability?" Shaughnessy asked incredulously. "This whole thing was crazy."

Fed up, she turned to Kosmas for help in navigating the VA system and dealing with logistical issues. She received her payment on May 15 and still has \$90 of it remaining.

"I should probably use it to get to the beauty parlor," she said, laughing. "But I haven't decided yet."

Additional Facts

How to get help:

- By phone: Surviving spouses are urged to call 1-800-749-8387, at which counselors will help determine their ineligibility.
- Online: Inquiries also may be submitted via the Internet at www.vba.va.gov/survivorsbenefit.htm.

Relief. Rep. Suzanne Kosmas helped Phyllis Shaughnessy, 82, get her husband's \$104 death benefit. (Photo by Craig Bailey, FLORIDA TODAY)